

HOMES & INTERIORS SCOTLAND



RURAL ESCAPE

So while we do not in fact start our journey from our castle (a tenement in Scotstoun, more like), by the time we knock the snow off our boots and settle down in front of one of Glenmuick's welcoming fireplaces, it's safe to say we are feeling like lord and lady of the manor.

Over a four-course dinner that includes the estate's own venison and beef, all cooked by Andrew himself, we decide upon the classes we'll take during our stay. With the Royal Lochnagar distillery in Balmoral just a stone's throw from the house, we figure it would be disrespectful to HM and co were we not to indulge in the whisky-tasting class (a decision in no way swayed by your writer's penchant for a fine malt, of course). The tutor, Gordon Muir, meanders through the history of eight selected bottles and flawlessly weaves in stories of his time teaching around the world. When I ask him which is his favourite whisky, I'm delighted to hear it's the same as mine (18-year-old Highland Park, for those who share our enthusiasm). After two hours, we retire to our room feeling full to the brim with newly acquired knowledge.

Our suite is suitably traditional. In the bathroom, the original, ultra-deep bath fills up in double-quick time thanks to a set of taps that flow faster than an unplugged dam. A quirky glazed china cockatoo sits above the fireplace keeping an eye on things, while a beguiling chaise longue fills the large space and just begs to be sprawled upon. There's no doubt that each piece has been carefully picked for a particular look, but it's one that ties into the feel of the house – anything more modern would be incongruous.

It's a lovely space to wake up to the next morning, at the crack of dawn, to get ready for our wildlife safari. We climb aboard our transport for the trip (our personable host Craig Westlake's off-road jeep is equipped with top-of-the-range telescope and binoculars as well as a cuddly toy capercaillie on the dashboard) and spot herds of red deer



(Clockwise from above) The games room is well equipped for a rainy day – you can play snooker, table-tennis, cards and table football, all under a forest of antlers and in front of a warming log fire; the recently converted tea house; warm oak panelling and well-dressed windows evoke a sense of grandeur in the dining room



RURAL ESCAPE

Bedside MANOR

This beautiful country house lay empty for much of the year – but not any more, thanks to a man on a mission to give us a taste of the high life

Words Gabriella Bennett

Picture the scene: after a long drive from your castle to the sprawling country manor in Royal Deeside that you use for the occasional spot of huntin', shootin' and fishin', you pass through the ancient wooden doors and into a grand snug filled with trophy heads and a roaring log fire. Sandwiches and cakes so light they might float away are served on Hermès crockery, and as you nibble you debate the best way to fill your afternoon – should it be a hand-blocked wallpaper tutorial or a sushi-for-beginners class?

Sounds too good to be true? Well, thanks to Andrew Mellon, it's entirely possible. He and his team at the Style Academy take over various stately homes (such as the House of Glenmuick, near Ballater) when the owners are out of town, opening the doors to guests and hosting a very special selection of workshops, as well as providing world-class accommodation.



and lots of black grouse – and I get my first glimpse of a real-life red squirrel. We stop for a mid-morning coffee break to scan the skies for golden eagles, but today is not our day – we tick two buzzards off the list but nothing larger. Time to head back to the house to warm up.

There's been plenty of activity in our absence: Andrew has been leading a cookery class and the fruits of the students' labour are served up in the grand dining room. We tuck into Moroccan couscous and spicy baked cauliflower with pomegranate seeds, along with flash-fried lamb that's as tender as a pair of whisky samplers' heads in the morning. Truffles from the Highland Chocolatier round off an exemplary feast.

A brief but comprehensive tour of the house is in order just to take in the sheer size of the place – the games room, with its ceiling studded with antlers, is surely the star of the show. It's only when we reach the children's lounge that we're reminded for the first time that this is someone's home: there's a montage of photos of the family's dogs and kids above the fireplace. We can only dream of owning a place like the House of Glenmuick in the future, but for now, a weekend stay in the lap of luxury will do the trick. ■

Double rooms start at £245 per night, including dinner (with wine), breakfast, lunch and afternoon tea. The Style Academy, 07787 975743, www.the-style-academy.com

IN THE AREA

Guided tours of neighbouring Balmoral Castle's grounds, gardens and exhibitions begin in late spring, while keen anglers can take advantage of salmon fishing on the River Dee. In the town of Ballater, where the House of Glenmuick is located, the Chocolate Gallery is worth a visit to sample some delicious sweet treats along with a cup of excellent coffee. A trip to the area wouldn't be complete without taking advantage of the area's wonderful hill-walking – Lochnagar, Ben Avon and Clenshee are all there to be conquered. The Old Royal Station in the town is a refurbished train carriage which doubles as a museum – small, but great value for money and fun for all the family.